

Statement of John Porter
Principal
T.C. Williams High School
Alexandria, Virginia

Before the
House Budget Committee Democratic Caucus and the
Senate Democratic Policy Committee

July 18, 2003

Good morning. Thank you for inviting me to participate on this panel. I am here this morning on behalf of my students, staff, and fellow school leaders to discuss the fiscal realities facing schools in light of the No Child Left Behind Act. It is my hope that through this testimony, I might be able to offer Congress a better understanding of the many challenges this law creates for secondary schools and the resources needed to meet the requirements of the law.

My comments are based on my experience of thirty-four years in education and twenty-three in principalships at the elementary, middle and high school levels with the last nineteen at T. C. Williams High School.

T. C. Williams is the only comprehensive public high school in the Alexandria school district. We serve over 2,000 students. Our student body is very diverse. Forty-four percent of our students are African-American, twenty-two percent are classified as white, and thirty-four percent are foreign born. We have students from approximately seventy different countries. Approximately, forty percent of our students are eligible for free or reduced lunch. Such ethnic and socioeconomic diversity is certainly a strength for our students and our community, but also presents many challenges related to addressing teaching and learning for our students.

One of the most immediate challenges relates to foreign students and standardized testing. I have read research that indicates an individual needs to be fully immersed in a language for five to seven years in order to truly have the language skills necessary to perform on a standardized test. I am concerned about how many of our foreign born students, solely as a result of language barriers, will drop out of school instead of stay in school. While the NCLB requirements are well intended, these students must be provided with adequate supports in order for them to achieve. We want **all** of our students to leave us with the knowledge and skills necessary to lead productive lives in whatever direction they choose.

With regard to the topic at hand, my concern is that NCLB promises to be, at least at this point, yet another law passed without the funding necessary to implement the initiative. Only approximately five percent of federal Title I funding reaches high schools.

Additionally, the President's budget eliminated over forty education or education-related programs. Four of particular note are:

1. School Leadership Program, which is designed to retain, recruit and provide professional development for principals. This becomes all the more important in the age of NCLB, as principals will be held accountable for instruction and student outcomes. The necessity of having a well-trained, knowledgeable instructional leader in every school is more important than ever as research indicates that school success is inextricably linked to the quality of leadership in that school.
2. Dropout Prevention Program, which funds specific efforts to keep students engaged and in school. With a law that requires that no child be left behind, how could the administration or Congress possibly consider cutting a program that improves the chances of students staying in school? While much has been done since my years in high school, when the dropout rate was much higher, nearly 540,000 students across the nation will leave school this year without attaining a high school diploma. Overall, the nation's high school graduation rate hovers around sixty-nine percent but in many urban areas the figure is even lower, with some districts graduating less than fifty percent of their students.
3. Comprehensive School Reform, which provides funds for systematic schoolwide improvement programs. With NCLB, schools and systems will be required to rethink how instruction is delivered and make the necessary changes to insure compliance and what is best for students. How can such an extensive reform effort as required by the new law be accomplished with such programs being cut?
4. Smaller Learning Communities, which provides grants for high schools and school districts to plan and create smaller schools, schools within schools and other smaller learning environments. Research shows that smaller learning communities (i.e. smaller schools, schools within schools, house plans and cluster programs) enhance learning outcomes, which is one of NCLB's major concerns, by helping to personalize and contextualize students' educational experience and facilitate the implementation of other effective strategies for improving student achievement. We are in the midst of designing a new building for T. C. Williams built around the smaller learning communities model as my experience indicates the closer you can get to students to show that you care, the more success you can expect. I can't stress enough the importance of breaking larger schools down in to smaller learning environments.

These federal cuts "trickle down" to the building level. My school district serves approximately 11,000 students. Most of the dollars come from local funding. However, like many other states, the Commonwealth of Virginia finds itself grappling with a budget deficit. And, while the Governor of Virginia has resisted education funding cuts at the state level, the cuts in other arenas passed on to localities many times place the burden further on the locality. This in turn leads decision makers to cut local school

budgets to make up the deficit coming from the state. I have a concern that as funding is cut to Alexandria in other areas, our local government will be forced to spread those cuts to all city agencies and programs, including education.

One area in which we are already seeing an impact is related to NCLB's new standards for paraprofessionals. We won't be able to continue to pay what we pay for this very important position that now requires two years of college. But, where will the money come from for the additional salary required to get highly qualified candidates in this role?

So, what to do? I encourage Congress, and this committee in particular, to speak with and listen to those who are actually in the buildings, on "the front lines", the ones who guide school-wide instruction and academic improvement activities. Visit your local school, speak with the principal, spend a day in a classroom working with students and truly discover what is most important, the students. Then, work with your colleagues to positively affect fiscal year 2004 funding levels for education.

In order to successfully implement NCLB, more federal funding is needed. The federal share of the pie has always been small and rarely enough to support the mandates placed on the states and localities. And, for the record, I am diametrically opposed to any proposal that would take funds from public education to support vouchers. We simply must have the financial resources necessary to complete the job. Without the resources, the law merely sets schools up for failure, which most assuredly will guarantee that many children will be left behind. We are not afraid of accountability and we, most certainly, want students to succeed academically. However, real resources are needed to accomplish this mission.

Thank you.